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SUBJECT: URUGUAY: FRENTE AMPLIO CANDIDATE JOSE MUJICA ON
THE STUMP (C-AL9-01505)

REF: MONTEVIDEO 434

¶1. (U) Summary. On August 13, Jose "'Pepe"' Mujica and Danilo Astori, the Frente Amplio (FA) candidates for President and Vice President of Uruguay, held a campaign rally in the town of Paysandu. The event provided a case study into the differing campaigning styles and messages of the two running mates, with Astori ardently defending the FA's record and Mujica publicizing it as a more inclusive party. End Summary.

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The FA Presidential Ticket Goes to the Interior
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¶2. (U) Mujica and Astori arrived in Paysandu in the midst of a week-long tour of Uruguay's interior, during which the two candidates traveled to various towns in the departments of Paysandu, Salto, and Artigas prior to their return to Montevideo for their official nomination as candidates August ¶16. The site of the event in capital city Paysandu, a basketball gym belonging to a local youth center, was filled to capacity with thousands of Mujica/Astori supporters, many carrying the red, white, and blue Frente Amplio flag atop fishing poles. Just prior to the introduction of the two candidates, a parade of youths entered the building beating drums in the candombe style - a former slave tradition now popularized and performed by many Uruguayans, especially during Carnival celebrations.

¶3. (U) Following brief speeches by local FA politicians to warm up the crowd, Mujica and Astori ascended to the stage. Mujica began the night as master of ceremonies, introducing the other politicians joining the two candidates on-stage, including Paysandu Governor Nino Pintos and Mujica's wife, Senator Lucia Topolansky, who received the second-largest ovation after Mujica himself. Finally, Mujica introduced Astori, who was met by slightly less enthusiastic, but still spirited, applause.

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Mujica and Astori: Different Styles and Messages
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¶4. (SBU) Astori's relatively brief speech focused on the achievements of current President Tabare Vazquez's administration. While the traditional parties stirred up fears of economic instability and risk prior to Vazquez's inauguration, he asserted, this FA government has been more successful than previous administrations, including that of former president and National Party candidate Luis Alberto Lacalle, in creating economic growth and in controlling debt. Astori also mentioned some of the most popular Vazquez programs, including Plan Ceibal (the one-laptop-per-child program), and again attacked Lacalle for his comment about cutting the budget with a "'buzzsaw"' ("motosierra"). (Reftel)

15. (SBU) In contrast with Astori's no-nonsense, attack-and-defend approach, Mujica's speech was inclusive, emphasizing an open door to potential Frente Amplio voters of all parties. Mujica beseeched his supporters not to offend opposition party members, whose votes instead would have to be won over by the FA through appeals to their consciences. He also emphasized the diversity of the Frente Amplio, arguing that the coalition is made up of both Christians and atheists, as well as former supporters of the Colorado and National parties.

16. (SBU) The divergent messages of the two running mates were accompanied by notably different styles on the stump. Dressed in a sweater and collared shirt, Astori spoke in a very formal style, standing ramrod-straight at the podium as he described the accomplishments of the Frente Amplio in chronological order, starting with the movement's inception in 1971. In contrast, Mujica appeared at ease on stage, but projected a much less professional image, wearing jeans rolled up at the ankles and drinking the traditional beverage mate during his running mate's speech. When speaking, Mujica wandered around the stage with a microphone in his hand, and tended to ramble, jumping from topic to topic. His rhetoric was peppered with personal anecdotes (including a story about his job at a Paysandu brick factory) and philosophical observations (such as his statement that "every human being is the center of a small planetary system"). While Astori spoke for around twenty minutes, Mujica ran on for almost an hour, but appeared more adept at capturing the crowd's attention through his frequent use of humorous colloquialisms.

Comment

17. (SBU) With most pollsters viewing the presidential race at this point as a dead heat, Mujica's message of inclusion likely was geared towards the vital 7% of Uruguayans who remain undecided, along with National and Colorado party voters who might be disenchanted with their candidates. However, he also appears to have taken the offensive in recent days, describing National Party vice-presidential candidate Jorge Larranaga as a "lapdog" ("perro faldero") in a speech following the FA's official nomination of the Mujica/Astori ticket. Following several weeks in which Mujica and his opponent Luis Alberto Lacalle have reached for the center through conciliatory rhetoric, this comment could be an indication of a nastier campaign to come as October's election nears. End Comment.

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